1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
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133 point, as a rule cross over to the mainland and from there go by foot behind the promontory till they come out in front of this most northerly island, to which, sooner or later, they will get taken in a Vao canoe. For those who venture by sea the "Lip of Ta-har" is found to divide itself into three smaller promontories, after rounding the first of which the extreme north-eastern point of Vao comes into view. Seaward, the surf breaks on the two half-submerged reefs of Tolamp and Mal-weaweng already referred to, which were once islands inhabited by folk some of whose descendants are now refugees on Vao. Keeping well to landward of these, and rounding the last point, the whole island of Vao comes into view, sprawling in the tropical sea.

THE ISLAND OF VAO

Main physical features. First view of the natives.

This island is roughly square, containing about 250 acres, or rather less than half a square mile of land, on which about 400 people live.[1] Its curving coastline accounts for the fact that its longest east-to-west axis is rather over half a mile long.

[137] The whole island is covered with vegetation, but the humus in which it grows is in most places not more than a foot and a half deep. Below this, on the side facing the channel, is a layer, not more than a foot thick, of sand, below which is a thin layer of hard volcanic ash.[2] Below

[312] this again is sand, in which fresh water appears when the level of the sea is reached. It is from this source that the natives obtain their water supply, by means of artificially dug pits. The level rises and falls with the rise and fall of the tide. Its comparative freshness is probably due to the filtering action of the sand through which it passes, but its sea origin is seen in the fact that when left to stand it very quickly becomes stale.[3]

[134] This sandy soil exists only on the south and west parts of the island. To the north and east it is replaced by a kind of clay formed by the decomposition of coral rocks. The highest point marked on the Admiralty chart is 120 feet. Seen from the mainland, however, this elevation is hardly visible, on account of the trees which from a distance appear to cover the whole ground. For, as is the case with all the Small Islands, no sign of habitation is seen from the sea.

Only as we approach the islet itself do we become aware of the rare

[1] For discussion of past and present population see Appendix I.

[2] Godefroy, 1, 1933, pp. 31, 32. He adds that the thin layer of hard volcanic ash is found also in Oba, where the word for ash is *gwis*, and that for the hard volcanic layer is *gwengwea*.

[3] Really fresh water can be obtained only from the streams that flow from the mountains on the adjacent mainland, which the natives bring over in large hollow bamboos, the free ends of which are stopped with leaves.